

we all need somebody to lean on by maplemood

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Summary:

He spends hours studying his, at first. The scratches are all three thicker than his little finger, ropey and raised. They're the dull, dirty color of old blood. The color's probably why Mom hates them.

we all need somebody to lean on

Author's Note:

This is the third ST fic I've started thinking I could keep it around 3,000 words. Clearly I have a problem.

(One note: I've read soulmate fics, but never written one of my own before. There are things I'm probably [definitely] going to get wrong; for example, I use the concepts of soulmates and soulbonding more or less interchangeably here. Hopefully it's not enough to distract from the story.)

i.

Harringtons aren't late bloomers. Aren't and never have been, and so it surprises exactly no one when Steve rocks up to the first day of second grade with three parallel scratches fresh across the knob of his left hip. No one but Steve himself.

"Oh, God," his mom sniffed the evening before when he came barreling in from the pool, damp towel and soaked swim trunks flapping, to show her. "God, baby, those look like scars."

"They sting," Steve said, matter-of-factly because it was a fact. "A lot."

He's sorry he told her; really, he is. The second the word *sting* dropped Mom's face crumpled, eyes and nose and chin all mooshing together like a used Kleenex, and she started to cry.

Steve yelled for his dad a full minute before remembering Dad was away making money in Columbus, wherever Columbus was. Then he got Mom a glass of water, hacking off a slice of lemon to stick on the rim. It didn't help. So finally he clambered into her lap, still dripping, mad at her, mad at himself; he was too damn old for this.

"Hey," he mumbled into the side of her neck. "Hey, Mom, they don't

sting anymore. Okay?”

Felt like Dad was right there in the kitchen with them, muttering low under his breath. *Too damn old.*

“I mean it, Mom. Don’t cry.”

Afterwards Mom wrapped her arms around him and squeezed once, so hard Steve felt one lung squash into the other. She kissed the top of his head, smiled, wiped her eyes, and ordered two deluxe combo pizzas with anchovies.

She wants him to forget she busted out crying on the day he got his soulmark like it was the saddest news she’d ever hear. Steve pretends he does. He pretends the worst thing about that day was barfing up six pieces of anchovy combo pizza the night after. He also pretends he doesn’t remember asking Mom if her and Dad’s soulmarks matched.

“Honey,” she said, too wet and wobbly for a snap, “that’s not polite.”

Which was all the answer Steve needed.

He spends hours studying his, at first. The scratches are all three thicker than his little finger, ropey and raised. They’re the dull, dirty color of old blood. The color’s probably why Mom hates them.

Steve likes them. Matter of fact, he likes them a lot. He knows some people get pretty marks, tiny flowers or tiny stars or tiny words spelled out in cursive. He never wanted something pretty. Scars are badass. Whoever his mark matches must be a badass, even if Steve isn’t quite on his way to being one yet.

On the first day of second grade Becka Hanley is the only other kid in his class with a soulmark. A milky watercolor constellation splatters across her cheeks like freckles. When they’re at their desks she props her face in her hands, trying to hide it, but Steve sits right across from her and he thinks it’s totally the coolest thing he’s ever seen.

On the second day of second grade Steve kisses Becka in the coat closet.

On the third day of second grade Krissy Michaels tells Mrs. Yost she saw Steve kissing Becka in the coat closet.

On the fourth day of second grade Steve stays home. Mom snaps at him, cries some more, and says kissing in the coat closet is off limits, and touching another person's soulmark is more off limits and *I don't care if it's right there on her face Steve, when your grandpa's grandpa was a kid you could get your hand cut off for even asking!*

Do you want to get your hand cut off?

Obviously he doesn't. That night Steve thinks about kissing Becka, on her cheek and then on her lips. It felt good. He knows Mom knows it felt good—it's why she doesn't want him to doing it anymore. Steve's not sure, doesn't know how to say it or how to think it, but it wasn't the kind of good Mom and Mrs. Yost think it was. He and Becka were...they were close together, all right? As close as he's ever been to anyone besides Mom. Being close to somebody else felt right. It felt warm and it felt right and it felt good.

He thinks Dad'll mutter about it the way he does whenever Steve hugs Mom, except when Dad comes home and hears the whole story, all he does is laugh and ruffle Steve's hair. Steve doesn't know what to think.

He keeps a lot of things close, a lot of things secret, after that. Starts chasing the feeling, and as the emptiness at home closes in, as Dad drops in without ever actually staying and Mom stops reaching for him (a little while after Steve stops reaching for her), he begins to think he'll never get it back. That's when Steve knows he's well and truly fucked, because he's never wanted anything back so much as his single, musty minute of closeness in Mrs. Yost's coat closet.

So.

Middle and high school, he makes a game of it. *Show me yours and I'll show you mine; hey, could be we're soulmates—I mean, I'm definitely feeling a connection here. Are you?* Steve kisses the single lopsided spiral etched on Laurie Albright's right thigh the summer after tenth grade. Afterwards, she traces her fingers over the jut of his hip bone, sniffing, while he holds her, pats at her hair and tells her he doesn't

care. The whole soulmate deal's a crock of shit, anyway.

Becka goes by Becky now. They hook up for real the night of prom, Steve half out of his borrowed tux, Becky hauling up her skirt since the zipper jams every other inch. She's better with her tongue than Laurie was; he takes her out for milkshakes afterwards and they have a good laugh about the coat closet. She graduates a year early. Later her friends tell him she met a guy in Indianapolis with an identical starry cluster across his shoulder.

Amy comes almost right after Laurie. She's sweet, like peaches or warm rain (Steve bombs a unit on figurative language that same semester). The pink peony blooming on her belly is ticklish, so they have a lot of fun with it.

The closeness, though. It doesn't come. Not for long, and never to stay.

Steve finally plucks up the courage to ask Nancy Wheeler out three months after Amy. She's skirted his sightline for months, interested if a little disdainful; he's smart enough to know he's not all that smart, but he knows this: the old tricks won't work on her. Nance is all baby-doll eyes missing nothing and a pointed Bambi chin sharp enough to cut. She's been studying him longer than he's been ogling her (Steve doesn't know this now—he will later). She knows the way he works, all his usual lines and smirks and switchbacks. She knows what he likes. She knows how to use it to get what she wants.

She's the one who shows him her soulmark first, the thin white scar spider webbing across her palm. She stares him down, close enough to touch, to breathe in. Dares him.

"No soulmate bullshit," she whispers, shy. Not uncertain. "Okay?"

"Okay," Steve answers, and when he kisses her palm, takes her in his arms, feels the bump of her hip against his scarred one, he thinks, *This is it*.

This is as near to the first moment of closeness—as near to closeness—as he'll ever get.

Days later, when he jerks the camera out of Byers' hands, he notices a white scar, cut deeper than Nancy's and spanning the opposite palm. Steve knows after one look. It's a mirror image.

He tells himself he doesn't care. Tells himself it doesn't matter. No soulmate bullshit, right?

It doesn't stop him from smashing the camera (the camera Byers blew weeks of late shift wages on, or, hell, probably blew someone for) onto the blacktop.

ii.

Nancy stays. Nancy goes. Nancy's part of him. Always will be, will always want to be. It's the best Steve can ask for.

And he's happy for it. Really. As happy as he can be, which under the circumstances isn't all too happy—still. He's not alone now. He's not alone, and as long as he's not alone he'll keep on going.

Nancy came and Nancy left. Dustin came and Dustin...shit, Dustin's here to stay. Dustin and everyone else; the loudmouthed, dumbassed bunch of kids whose names Steve used to mix up so they wouldn't get any ideas.

Dustin.

Lucas.

Max.

iii.

"Hey," he says. "Sit still."

Steve rips open a pack of antiseptic wipes, dug up from the never-used first-aid kit Mom bought for the never-happening Clan Harrington camping trip. He's barely touched one to her knee when

Max flinches so dramatically she almost tips off the edge of the pool lounge chair.

“Come on, I told you to sit still!” On instinct, Steve grabs for her leg, yanking it straight and swiping down the bloody scrape.

In return, Max kicks him straight in the center of his chest. “It stings, asshole.”

Steve takes a second to catch his breath, another to blink the red haze out of his eyes. “No shit,” he finally wheezes. “Got anything else for us today, Einstein? The sky is blue? Water is wet? Shit is brown?”

“Shit isn’t always brown,” she snaps, like it’s a valid point.

“Jesus Christ—Dude, one more cannonball and you’re out!” Steve bellows in the direction of Dustin’s splash. The assbat lands at a funny angle and next thing he knows Mrs. Henderson’s suing him for letting her son go vegetable on his watch. Except, knowing Mrs. Henderson (“Oh, you can call me Claudia, Steve!”), it’ll be more along the lines of how she understands it wasn’t his fault—so worse.

In Dustin’s defense, Steve wouldn’t have worried about it five minutes ago. In Steve’s defense, five minutes ago Max tackled Lucas in the shallow end, taking the skin off both their knees. He’s so used to seeing them on about his level—doesn’t say much for his level, but they’ve been through it together, okay?—it’s like slamming down to earth, remembering how young they really are. Not even high schoolers yet, and the way Lucas caught his breath when he landed, and the way Max scowls so he’ll miss the tears glittering in the corners of her eyes, makes Steve’s gut twist. Which pisses him off. Which—

He’s not looking for it when he finds it. Sounds like a line right out of one of those peeling-his-eyeballs-off-the-back-of-his-skull arthouse flicks (sorry, *films*) Steve bets Nance and Jonathan now use as their makeout background noise of choice.

(Because it’s a good line.)

He’s blotting the blood off, slowly—if Max flinches again he might do

something that shows how close he is to losing it over this whole stupid thing, or else she'll be the one to lose it and kick him, this time most likely in the head—and, fuck. There it is, right over the scrape, just under her kneecap. Three parallel scratches, ropey and raised, the color of dried blood.

They look, Steve thinks now, eleven years down the road, a whole lot like the scars you get from demodog claws.

Max must feel his eyes on them. A split-second later she knocks her toes against his chest in warning. "Watch it."

"Sorry," Steve says automatically. Shock hasn't set in yet. He prays it won't. "Sorry, if I don't get it clean it'll—uh—"

"Max!" Lucas bursts out.

"What?" She turns her whole body towards him, ankles jabbing Steve's shoulder on the way over.

"Max," the kid repeats, the note of wonder in his voice so strong Steve's heart sinks down to his colon.

And he has to look. Sidelong, since he's not a total animal anymore. Lucas has the right leg of his swimming trunks rolled up. Scars, three of them, slash up the inside of his thigh.

"No shit!"

Max falters. "No shit."

Steve isn't sure, and he sure as hell isn't going to ask, but he'd bet money on each of their marks matching each of his, to every cut. He feels it, certain in the pit of his gut.

"Guys? What did I miss? Guys!"

"Dustin, man, shut up!" Lucas yells.

He sounds too happy; Dustin comes bobbing to the edge like he's about to win an Olympic relay. "What?" he sputters, "What's going —"

No , Steve thinks. Then, *God, please no* .

Just goes to show, God exists, God has one fucked-up sense of humor, and God, right about now, must be laughing His heavenly ass off.

“Holy shit!” Dustin breathes. “Holy *shit!*” He sloshes up over the side, shoving Steve out of the way to stick his right ankle under the other two dipshits’ noses.

“See?” The kid wobbles and plants a hand on Steve’s shoulder to steady himself. “It’s, like, in miniature. It’s identical, though. Yeah?”

Lucas’s face goes slack.

Dustin pivots. “Steve? Speak the truth, Steve.”

Now the ankle’s waving in his face. Steve has to grab it, otherwise Dustin goes down like a tree, and again, one good crack on the cement is all it takes.

“You shitheads know this is the most inappropriate situation I, for one, have ever been in,” he says. “Right?”

A slow, molten blush starts at the roots of Max’s hair and Steve’s instantly sorry for going there. Dustin’s face goes pink, too. He rolls with it like a champ.

“Yeah, yeah, you have my permission to touch it. Blah, blah, blah.” He swats at Steve’s hair. “Tell ‘em, man.”

“I can barely see it,” Steve grumbles, rotating the ankle gently for a better look at its outer side. He’s very, very careful not to scrape a fingernail over it, no matter what Dustin says. He also knows what he’s going to see—it’s checking off boxes at this point.

The mark is smaller than the rest, but proportionate. Or it looks proportionate. Steve doesn’t have the specific inches, but...yeah. Proportionate.

They’re all waiting on him, Dustin practically vibrating, he’s so wired; Lucas letting loose with a slow, wicked grin, Max sharp-eyed under her blush.

"Looks like it," Steve says quietly, lowering Dustin's ankle to the ground. Slowly so the idiot won't stumble.

Lucas graces them all with an exhale almost as dramatic as Max's flinch. "Dude, how'd we miss...?"

"Did you ever spend a ton of time staring at *my* legs?" Dustin asks. "Guess this was kind of bound to happen," he adds after a jittery pause. "Like, we've spent practically our whole lives together—"

"You did," Max says.

"Aw, no." Lucas whirls back to her. "Hey, we fought big-ass monsters together, remember?"

"It's pretty much the same thing," Dustin agrees.

"No, Dustin! It's not." Max perches, ramrod-straight, on the edge of her chair. Her fingers slide between the rubber lattice to curl into fists. "What if I don't want to be your soulmate?"

"Too bad." Dustin shrugs. "It's fate, man...uh, girl. Lady?"

"I never asked to be bonded to both of you. Or either of you!"

Lucas cocks his head.

"Fair enough," Steve chimes in before he can stop himself. She shoots him a grateful look. The closest thing Max has got to grateful, anyway. There's something so unexpected, and so unexpectedly sweet, about it, that for a minute he relaxes. Maybe he can get through this all right. Maybe none of these three ever need to know.

One more time: God's got a fucked-up sense of humor. He (or cosmic fate or bad luck or whatever), makes sure Steve remembers Max's still-bleeding knees, makes sure he roots through the first-aid kit for band-aids, and makes damn sure that, when he leans over to slap them on, the waistband of his trunks slides down. Just a little.

Just enough.

Max hisses; a furious, drowning-cat kind of noise. She whips her legs

up under her.

Dustin's eyes widen. He lets go of Steve's shoulder, only to grab for it a split-second later, grip hard and certain. "You too?" he asks, quietly, like yelling the words will make them a lie (and doesn't Steve wish that were true; he'd be shouting from the rooftops if that were true).

But it's not, and this is Dustin. Steve tells the truth.

"Do I look like a scientist to you? It could be. Maybe. I don't know."

This, of course, is nowhere near anything the little asshats consider a satisfactory answer.

"Dude," Lucas growls. "Be serious!"

"Yeah, dude, we're talking about sacred stuff here!"

"They teach you this crap in ninth grade health class," Steve shoots back. "Pretty sure nothing there is sacred."

"So what?" Lucas flings out his arms. "You just don't care?"

Like it's the most unbelievable thing. And, honestly? He's playing the world's most half-assed lifeguard in his parents' backyard; clearly there isn't a whole lot else going on with his life. Truth mixes with the churning, pissed-off mess of resignation and *tenderness* (Dustin's open, grinning face, Max's and Lucas's peeled knees) circling inside Steve. Mixes, burns, spits out like bile.

"What do you want me to say, Lucas? Huh?" Kneeling on the concrete is doing fuck-all to help his own knees. Steve shoves off Dustin's hand and scrambles up. "I'm bonded to three eighth-graders and I'm supposed to be jumping for joy? Doing a little dance?" He sways his hips; it's supposed to be sarcastic. All it is is stupid. He stops.

"Come on," Dustin says, sounding suddenly small. "We didn't plan this."

"Damn straight."

The look Dustin gives him—Jesus, it's enough to make Steve wish he could take it all back. Fine, he can, but he won't; it's not what you do when you're eighteen and you used to be somebody, even if it was only for a little while and that somebody was as much a part of who you actually are as, hell, that asshole Hargrove's mullet; it's not what you do when you used to have somebody.

It's not what you do when you're starting to think the somebody you needed then isn't the somebody you need now.

Steve backs to the edge of the pool, yanking his waistband up over the mark. "This is not how it's supposed to go," he says.

He sounds smaller than Dustin.

And apparently it's the last straw for Max, who's been tangled up, her soulmarked leg tucked under her, in a simmering knot that all of a sudden explodes and launches at Steve, plowing into him like a cannonball to the chest; shit, when did the kid get so strong? Dustin and Lucas are yelling, or cheering (fine—they're definitely cheering), and the last thing Steve hears before breaking the surface of the water is, "You *asshole!*"

Give her credit. No two words describe his life up to this point better than those.

iv.

"I'm not saying he didn't deserve it. Max, we need to handle this—"

The freezer door slams.

"Like men?" She smacks the pack of frozen peas into Steve's hand like it's acid. Like she hopes it's acid.

"...and women." Lucas finishes lamely.

"God. You're worse than Dustin."

There's a throb building behind his left eye he knows is the beginning

of a migraine. He's been getting them at least weekly since taking the plate (not to mention, what, twenty punches?) to the head. Does Max remember that? Does Lucas remember he'd be a smear on Mrs. Byers' wall if Steve hadn't—

They saved you.

Baseball bat slamming into hardwood, Max screaming, "Say it! Say you understand!"

Dustin's fingers on his face, soft and fumbling, Lucas's hand patting his shoulder.

"Got to get on back up....Come on, King Steve. You can do it."

Remember that?

Lucas chatters on. Steve presses the cold, pebbled pack to his bruised forehead, tries to follow.

"Marks don't always mean—you know—that kind of bond. Get me?"

"I don't care if they do." Max's voice spikes through his eye socket. "I'm not dating all three of you."

"So don't." Dustin roams between the kitchen and the open back door, fingers tracing over Mom's granite countertops restlessly, his back to Steve. "Will's got a matching mark with Jonathan. They're brothers."

Nancy had another. A soft, rainbow-colored bruise splotched along her collarbone like a hickey. He didn't think much of it until the night after the party. Barb was gone, it was gone, and there was this dark, muttering buzz in the back of Steve's head, this niggle of the beginning of the end of everything.

"We help each other out," says Lucas. He's perched on the counter. Max, like Dustin, is pacing along it, and Steve slumps, glowering, at the kitchen island. The room ripples, static on a crap TV; he slides the peas over his eye.

"We help each other," the kid repeats, and bites his lip. "We're

friends, and, I guess...I guess we need each other. You know? That's all it means. Really."

No. Not all and not really. None of this is simple. Every word has weight behind it.

"I already said," says Max. "What if I don't want it?"

Lucas looks down at her for a minute. Something in his face tells Steve he's as scared of the rest of them, and he feels every ounce of weight.

"If you don't want it, why did you get so mad when St—"

Okay.

"I'm going back out," Steve says. Then slips, thanks to the slick footprints pattered all over the brand-new flooring. Lucas starts to slide off the counter and he snaps, "You follow me and I'm beating your ass into the concrete."

"Awesome." Max rolls her eyes.

"There's lemonade in the fridge. Drink it. Order a pizza. I don't care."

He's out the door, stumbling across the patio; it's Dustin (it's always Dustin) who tries calling him back.

"We're not gonna leave you." He doesn't bother faking reassurance. It sounds like what it is.

Steve snorts. "That's what I'm afraid of."

A threat.

Drops of dried blood spot the lounge chair. He thinks about wiping them off, thinks he doesn't care, and slings himself down with a groan. His skull rattles, swims. The migraine's developed a pulse of its own.

No soulmate bullshit.

Right?

Right. Right after he lost his favorite lighter torching a warren of slithering vines, right after he swerved back to the house, spotting road signs in triplicate, right after dragging himself through all the rooms before letting the kids in, in case Hargrove was curled up under one of the beds, right after realizing another fight like the last one would probably kill him; right after sagging to his knees over the Byers' toilet and two minutes into barfing his guts up, Steve heard footsteps.

Max.

She came in without a word. Crouched down while he mumbled "Ocupado," bile stinging the cuts in his mouth, his loose left molar. Her hands were cold on the nape of his neck, his forehead. The kid cradled his head as he threw up, and Steve didn't meet her eyes then but he imagines they were a little scared, a little pissed, and mostly...normal. Like it was no big deal, no kind of deal at all. She'd do it for anybody.

Max does nothing for just anybody.

He needs time. Time to process—

There's no time. What's done is done. What's done was marked on their skin long before they met. Apparently it's what pulled them together; Steve's used to blaming Dart, parallel dimensions, and Billy Hargrove, all things he could've avoided, maybe, in some other universe.

Max held his head over the toilet. Lucas and Dustin found their way in in time for the grand finale: Steve coughing up a rope of burning yellow bile and spitting the molar out with it. Dark specks swarmed his vision, melting as the world went red-hot and cottony. He knows they got him to the couch with Wheeler Junior's help. Someone spread a blanket over him, someone else kept butting up in his face—"Steve? How many fingers am I holding up? *Steve* —"

It stung. The first time he met Dustin—really met Dustin—his soulmark stung again, like lines of fire drawn across his hip. This was

in the car, with the kid blabbering about pollywogs and baloney and dead cats in huge, gulping bursts, each breath bringing along a fresh load of words. No way was Steve pulling over to check under the waistband of his jeans. He gritted his teeth, chalked it up to stress (or something), and kept driving.

Now he wonders if Dustin felt the same pain racing along the scars on his ankle. He wonders what the little dickhead chalked it up to.

"...many fingers—No, man, stay with me. You can't go to sleep. You hear me, Steve? Don't fall asleep!"

"We help each other," Lucas said. "We need each other." Not really true, is it? He was being diplomatic, trying to smooth the waters, but when the chips are down, it's always the kids who've come running to help Steve.

The truth is, he needs those little shitheads more than they've ever needed him.

v.

Nance didn't believe in soulmates. Still doesn't. The last time they met, and Steve tried getting it through her head that she and Jonathan were the poster-couple for the whole damn thing, she glared down at the line in her palm as if her eyes might melt it off.

"Things just worked out this way," she said, and flicked her glare upwards when he laughed.

"You're a goddamn idiot, Nancy Wheeler."

Her face, the clenched line of her jaw, softened then. It was five days, maybe a week, since the demodogs. They were cramped into a diner booth, facing each other across the table. The waitress kept asking Steve how he was doing—still swollen up green and purple, with the kids' rainbow band-aids slapped across like duct tape over a levee.

Nancy reached across, let her fingers trail over one for a moment. "And you're beautiful, Steve Harrington."

He loved her, but he never thought they were particularly alike before now, when he sees how hard, how desperately, she was trying to outrun fate. Or, barring that, to pretend it didn't exist in the first place. Steve feels the same urge churning in his stomach, the same panic choking in his throat. Not for the same reasons; Nance needs to get out of Hawkins. She needs to be more than proms and champion basketball games and late dates in crummy diners. Steve doesn't. He just needs someone on the sidelines at his games, someone by his side in the diner.

He's no great loss to her. He wouldn't be one to the kids either. They'd be losses to him, and that's what holds Steve back, more than them being loud and needy and annoying and goddamn *middle schoolers*. He squared up to it once, before he knew anything about this crap. He doesn't know if he can do it again.

vi.

The world's gone red-hot and cottony, not as badly this time. Badly enough—Steve's a bitch when it comes to pain tolerance generally and migraines specifically. There's no walking off a giant thumb popping your eyes out of their sockets like grapes.

Mutters float over from the kitchen. Cabinets slamming. They're probably trashing the place; he should at least yell up at them to close the back door. Quit wasting cold air. Every time he moves his jaw, though, a fresh cluster of pain explodes behind his eye. Plus the smell of chlorine coming off the pool isn't exactly soothing.

If he tries getting up now Steve knows he'll vomit.

More slamming. He hears one of them (Lucas?) call, "Found it!"

He needs to get back up to them. He needs to...not apologize, okay...he needs to say...

Something.

Dustin had his back turned to him. Lucas was doing his best to make sense of this, to hold them together. Max was pacing, not wanting to

be bonded anymore than Steve did; furious he didn't. He doesn't, the thing still is, he doesn't or he knows he shouldn't, but...

Steve thinks—

Mother of fucking God— *Ow* —

His loss, sooner or later. He doesn't have to make it that much sooner. He doesn't have to make it now.

Or, he needs to get himself out of this chair, somehow without dumping his stomach over the concrete, and goddammit, *fine*, he needs to apologize.

It'll take some doing.

Steve's managed to flop over on his side, the slushy pack of peas still pressed over one eye, and is considering exactly how slowly he'll need to swing both legs off the edge to avoid a projectile situation when he hears footsteps.

"Hey, spaz. Lie back down."

He cracks an eyelid. Her knees are level with his face, scabbed over, the soulmark looking puffier than usual. A twinge cuts across Steve's hip.

"Kid, just get a damn band-aid."

Max ignores him. "Stick out your tongue."

When Steve obeys, she practically slaps the pill onto it. He coughs. "Cyanide?"

"Aspirin," she says, stepping aside so Lucas can press the rim of a wine glass to his lips.

"Sorry, man, we couldn't find regular ones."

"Top two shelves of the pantry," Steve answers after a sip. Lucas, for the first time today, looks insulted.

“Who keeps glasses there? Your parents are insane.”

“Preaching to the choir.” He coughs again. The pill isn’t going down easy. “Listen—”

“Shut up,” Max interrupts. She’s circled to the other side of the lounge; the lattice creaks as she drops down next him. “You look dead.”

“Yeah, Steve, take it easy, okay?” After hesitating a minute Lucas sets the glass on the concrete and pushes at Steve’s shoulder until he rolls off his side, onto his back. A wave of nausea rolls with him. By the time it’s subsided to something bearable Steve finds himself sandwiched in the middle of the lounge, Max on one side and Lucas on the other.

“Where’s Dustin?” The words feel heavy in his mouth.

“Gotta give him a few minutes.” Lucas shifts, trying not to bump Steve with his shoulder. Bumping him anyway. “He’s pissed.”

It occurs to him—technically he remembers. Occured’s the better word; he’s not used, yet, to thinking of his actions as having implications. Consequences are one thing, easy to predict and pin down. Implications are deeper, murkier...anyway, it occurs to him that the kids didn’t ask to be here. Not that they’ve ever had a problem with inviting themselves over, but this time it was Steve, because the pool was open and the weather’s finally warm enough, and they’ve hung around so much in the past few months the house started feeling emptier without them. It’s never, not once in his life, felt *full* . Not even with Nance. The kids, they bring it to something close. Something past bearable and leading down to fun.

“Did you all get some lemonade?” he asks. “‘Cause if anybody passes out from heat stroke—”

“It’ll definitely be you,” Lucas says, sounding not unhappy at the idea.

Steve closes his eyes. He says, “I’m sorry.”

The migraine calms with a heavy, drowsy ebb. All at once and he

doesn't trust it. Better get the words out while he can.

He says, "You know, I ask you over and I treat you like shit for something you can't help. Goddamn. Emily Post would be proud."

He says, "I don't care about the soulmate stuff. I mean, I don't *not* care, I just—it's hard. When, you know, fate or whatever has to go making it so fucking official."

He says, "I don't care if you're middle schoolers."

He says, "At all."

There's a full-blown minute of silence afterwards. The weighty kind. It always makes Steve fidget, or want to fidget in this case since ebbing is not the same as stopped; heat beams off the overcast sky, burning his already-peeling nose, and they're going to let him stew in this, aren't they....

Max says, "Who's Emily Post?"

And Lucas answers, "Some dead white lady who always knows where to put the forks. Your mom probably loves her."

It's not funny.

It's a little funny.

Steve is still laughing when Dustin comes out, deep, dumbass snickers shuddering up from his gut, sending splinters of pain fracturing back through his skull. Lucas is shaking his head and Max is trying to clap a hand over Steve's mouth to stifle them.

"Stop it! You'll burst a blood vessel!"

Maybe she's right. The ache behind his eye is throbbing to a steady beat again. The aspirin's starting to take the edge of and—Jesus, where do these kids come from? How do they come up with the things they think, say the things they say? What Steve wouldn't give, sometimes, to step inside their heads; the world they see is so much brighter than his (this he does know). So much sharper.

A nudge at his leg. "Move your huge-ass feet."

The snickers taper off. Steve hikes up on his elbows, wincing, and bends his knees to draw his legs up. Dustin sits on the cleared end of the lounge. Steve's vision is liquid, but the kid's face looks too calm. Smoothed over. When he tries to meet Dustin's eyes, they dart away.

Is he imagining it, or do Lucas and Max draw closer at either side? As if they're protecting him (and as if Steve's the one who deserves protecting). He figures this migraine must be making him look especially pathetic.

"Man," Steve says. He swallows, licks his lips. Feels the seething core, fury and tenderness both; *don't screw this up, asshat. Don't lose him.* "I'm sorry."

A silence more loaded than the last. Steve waits. He waits for Dustin to turn back to him. When their eyes meet, he doesn't look away. It's hard. But he doesn't.

"Told you, Harrington," the kid finally says. "We're not gonna leave you."

It sounds no friendlier now than it did then. Dustin softens it by leaning back, his shoulder slumping against Steve's bent legs.

"What're we gonna to do?"

That. That's a question for days. For years.

Max doesn't try answering it, but she's the first one to speak, still at Steve's side as she knots up again, drawing into herself. "I still don't want it," she says. "I want you guys," (and bites that off hard; it must sting like a bitch). "All of you, not just Lucas. It's—people I know get hurt."

She doesn't say *people I love*. Steve won't, and neither will Lucas. Neither will Dustin. They're not to there yet. They're closer, though, than any of them really want to think about.

Could be we're soulmates. I'm feeling a connection here.

Are you?

All this time, all the people he hurt—he thought he knew what he wanted. Like that made some sense of it. Some good reason. It didn't. It doesn't, but it's almost friggin' poetic. Years Steve spent looking for the matching half. When the closeness in the musty coat closet had nothing to do with a kiss in the end.

Are you?

Out of all the people in Hawkins, in Indiana—hell, in the world. It was going to be them. Somehow this was certain, and Steve wonders if his half-sick, half-blown away feeling is what other people mean when they yap about the inevitability of it all. How it makes absolute and perfect sense, peace where there was none before.

A phantom pain rakes across his hip when he sits up, knocking shoulders with Max and Lucas, swiping at Dustin's still-damp hair.

"What're you all whining about?" He forces it out in the old, half-douchey King Steve tone. Stumbling over nothing. "Didn't your parents ever tell you this is perfectly natural?"

"How's that supposed to help?" Max growls.

"I don't know," he admits. "But we'll make it work. I promise."

And for the first time in a while, for the first time since Becka Hanely and her face full of stars, for the first time, Steve Harrington believes himself.

Author's Note:

1.) Title stolen from "Lean on Me", by Bill Withers. The other song I listened to quite a bit while I was writing was "Stand By Me" by Ben E. King.

2.) The ending scene was inspired by [this still](#) from *This Is Us*.

3.) This story takes place the summer before Dustin, Max, and Lucas start high school, so technically

they're not middle schoolers anymore, though, right now, I doubt that matters much to Steve.